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ABSTRACT

Central Missouri State University faculty forged partnerships with teachers in urban charter schools in Kansas City in an effort to ensure that early childhood teacher candidates' field experiences would take place in school environments with diverse populations of students. During the spring 2001 semester, early childhood teacher candidates were required to spend at least 2 days in an urban charter school kindergarten class with diverse students. Teacher candidates observed in the classroom, then worked with a partner to create an appropriate lesson to teach a small group of students. Candidates reflected on their first experience at the charter school via an electronic bulletin board. Next, they responded to points and concerns raised by fellow classmates. Overall, they were shocked and amazed by the unfamiliarity of what they saw in the charter schools during their first visit. At the end of the semester, after they had taught a lesson to the kindergarten students, they reflected again on their teaching experience and compared their first and final reflections. Their responses were generally positive. Many had not wanted to return initially but were eventually glad that they did. (SM)

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Early Childhood Teaching Experiences in Urban Charter Schools

Paper Presented at MUATE, Fulton, MO

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Goal 4 of The National Education Goals stated “By the year 2000, the Nation’s teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century” (The National Education Goals Panel, 2001, p.3). Thus, teacher educators need to provide early and diverse teaching experiences for teacher candidates if teachers are going to be prepared to teach ALL children. Field experiences in urban charter schools broaden Central Missouri State University (CMSU) students’ perspectives and better prepares them to meet the needs of future students.

Teacher candidates need opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills to teach a diverse population because teacher classroom behavior has a great effect on student academic achievement. If teachers are unable to teach diverse students, the students will not be successful. As important as knowledge and skills are teacher dispositions. Literature suggests that it is important for teachers to get to know their students, focus on students’ positive traits, believe in students’ abilities, and show students respect if the students are to achieve to their utmost potential (Arroyo, Rhoad, & Drew, 1999). If teacher candidates from rural, small town, and suburban backgrounds are to understand and respect all students in their class, teacher educators need to provide opportunities for diverse field experiences. Consequently, Central Missouri State University faculty has forged partnerships with teachers in urban Charter Schools in Kansas City in an effort to insure early childhood teacher education candidates’ field experiences take place in school environments with diverse populations of kindergarten students. In the spring

2001 semester, early childhood teacher candidates were required to spend at least two days in an urban charter school.

Teacher candidates need to be prepared to teach a growing diversity of students if we want them to consider teaching in urban schools. Each year there is a growing diversity in our school population and an increasing need for teachers in urban areas. In 1991, the most comprehensive report on the growing diversity of the student body in U.S. schools reported that by 2006 nearly 50% of the students would be nonwhite and Hispanic (Garcia, 1999, p.20). However, in a survey of teacher candidates only 18% of those surveyed said they would even consider teaching in an urban school system (Jones & Sandidge, 1997). In addition, Jones and Sandidge (1997) reported "teachers who feel comfortable in urban, multicultural environments appear to be much more supportive of and sensitive to the needs of their students" (p. 7). Likewise, teacher candidates that have only had field experiences and student teaching in exemplary classrooms with favorable environments are not prepared to perform successfully in challenging classrooms like those in many urban schools (Jones & Sandidge). Thus, it is important that appropriate teacher preparation in culturally diverse urban schools is crucial to success with diverse school populations. Because as stated by Irvine (1999), "If you don't know anything about what they [students of color] know, then how are you doing to teach them about making linkages?" (p. 3). Irvine goes on to say that teachers need to use examples and metaphors that make sense in the students' cultural repertoire and that culture can be learned (1999). Culture can be learned by studying, reading, visiting, meeting people and talking to people from the culture. Therefore teacher candidates need opportunities to learn culture of diverse students.

Arroyo, Rhoad and Drew (1999) reported "studies have shown that it is important for teachers to communicate understanding of cultural diversity among students" (p. 3). Therefore, it is plausible that teacher candidates need experiences with diverse students in order to understand and appreciate cultural diversity. The early childhood curriculum course at CMSU has required observation and teaching experiences for a number of semesters but most of the teacher candidates have chosen rural, small town, or suburban areas for their early field experiences. During the spring semester of 2001, in an effort to at least introduce the teacher candidates enrolled in the Early Childhood Curriculum Course to an additional area of diversity, they observed kindergarten classrooms in an urban charter school and then worked with a partner to create an appropriate lesson to teach to a small group of kindergarten children.

The teacher candidates reflected on their first experience at the charter school via an electronic discussion board. Next, they responded to points and concerns raised by fellow classmates. Overall, the teacher candidates were shocked by the unfamiliarity of what they saw in the charter schools during their first visit. General comments by the teacher candidates included the following:

- (1) As we drove up to the school, it did not look like an elementary school.
- (2) I felt intimidated because of the strict environment.
- (3) I was amazed at the diverse backgrounds of the students.
- (4) Coming from a very small town, I never realized the world was so diverse.
- (5) The children were wonderful and that was the best part of the day. They gave me hugs, wanted to hold my hand, and just needed someone to be there with them.

(6) I was exposed to the realities of the different levels of abilities in one kindergarten room as I saw more than one student who did not recognize the alphabet by name or sound and some children who were reading books.

Finally, at the end of the semester, after the teacher candidates had taught a lesson to the kindergarten students, they reflected on their teaching experience and compared their first reflection with their final reflection. The teacher candidate responses to the teaching experience were generally positive. Examples of their reflections follow:

- (1) I originally did not want to go back but I am glad we went and I think it was a good experience for myself as well as the kindergartners.
- (2) I enjoyed the experience with my children and wish that I could have had more time with them.
- (3) My reaction to our teaching visit was one of pleasure and enjoyment.
- (4) I never saw one child that was not having a very good time in our centers.
- (5) The children were well behaved and wanted us to come back again to teach a lesson. They gave us hugs when we left.

Research shows that early field experiences better prepare teacher candidates. In addition, field experience in urban settings better prepares teacher candidates to teach in diverse settings. However, there are difficulties associated with providing all teacher candidates with diverse teaching experiences. Many teacher candidates have jobs and commute an hour or more to campus therefore scheduling difficulties and time conflicts arise. Also, some teacher candidates are resistant to the idea of teaching in urban schools and want their field experiences in comfortable/familiar settings.

In conclusion, while a few visits to an urban charter school were not enough alone to prepare teacher candidates to teach in urban settings, they had an opportunity to experience a different, diverse teaching situation first-hand. Teacher candidate reflections, video recorded teaching, and charter school kindergarten teachers' input would guide planning for future urban charter school observation and teaching experiences that would be incorporated into early childhood courses.

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